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Bucharest-Cluj, via Ploiești
Short History of the Long Making of a Doctor
within the Private Romanian Teaching System

Daniela Alexandrescu



1991 was the year when I passed and at the same time failed my university admission exam. Chronologically, because emotionally things were different, this is the short story: I had failed the admission exam for the public University and nothing else really mattered, in spite of the fact that my folks were really happy for me being a student within the private teaching system.

My dad had come, soon after passing my baccalaureate exam, pay attention that we registered you at the ecologists and you are going to sit the exam in a week. I had a go at them because I didn't want there, I wanted to attend a public university. And I went to sit the exam. One can never know...The exam, an intelligence test. I had a great time in solving the logical problems and I was among the first students who entered the University. Now, you are already a student, you will be completely relaxed during your admission exam at the public university and you will succeed, my folks used to encourage me.

The exam for the public university practically consisted of three exams: Physics, Biology and Chemistry. The first year with a multiple choice test. I used to take up tutorials in Physics, had been submitted to various tests in Biology and had refused to attend the Chemistry tutorials after a month because I didn't like the teacher. I flunked with flying colours.

That's it, I shall work for a year and sit the

exam again next year. I had graduated from the Health Secondary School, I had good grades and the possibility to get a job as nurse anywhere I wanted. My folks were absolutely against the idea, saying that if I had started to work, I wouldn't have felt like learning. And mark my words, said my dad, the best universities in the West are private, where not anybody can get in. These are at the beginning, but you will see that in years we will have the same situation. And then there had followed the enumeration: the boy or girl of such and such person, good kids as well, also attend private universities. There was a generation behind which could have been my example. And the supreme argument: the rector was a Jew, that is one can imagine his money and influence, and that he will bring the best teachers and you will have indisputably better conditions than those in the public university. I very hardly fell for the compromise: to attend their courses for a year and then to try again at the public. And I kept on fantasizing: I shall pass the exam but since I am already going to be familiar with the subjects, I shall cumulate two years in one.

And this is how I started University.

There were several lecture rooms spread all over the city. The labs for the practical course were quite all right: substances and instrumentarium for Biochemistry, ingenious appliances for experiments in Biophysics and computers for

Biomathematics. And for Anatomy, the paradise of dissections- the Medico-Legal Institute. The Rector had publicly stated his intention to build a university campus in the next few years and there were already rumours among the students regarding the area under discussion.

The teachers had either taught in the Medical schools in the country and had been retired- some of them surprising us due to their intellectual vivacity- or had come from the research field, or were sharing their time between the lectures in a public university and those in our university. I have beautiful memories with some people who were retired, but whose lectures were a real pleasure to attend.

We were a very heterogeneous crowd. Some colleagues were in the same situation as I was, meaning they had recently graduated from the secondary school and had directly joined the University, some of them without even trying to sit an exam at the public university. There was a rumour that a girl had actually entered 'Carol Davila' University but had preferred to come to the Ecological University. Others ended up there after a series of fails in the exams at the public university- the old-timers had failed 6 or 7 times. Some were working in order to support themselves, the occupational range being very wide: there were people working as nurses, secretaries, doorkeepers or guardians. Some had their own business. One of the colleagues had no problem in accepting that she was prostituting herself. There were also students who had already graduated from a faculty. The most unusual cases were that of a lady engineer in her late fifties, who had discovered and patented a cure for burns but which she couldn't legally apply because she wasn't a doctor and that of her adoptive son. The lady, a more diligent student than her son and then most of us, was going to literally retire while in school, but, in spite of the ironies targeted at her by the majority of our colleagues, she was going to get the much desired diploma. There were also foreign students among us- not Arabs or Greeks, like in the public

University, but a Spaniard and an Italian girl. The former had a brother, also a student of the same university, but in the previous year. Spanish citizens, the brothers were actually Romanians and their family had a long time ago settled in Spain. Their father had a clinic there and he was really determined to have his children schooled according to the Romanian medical tradition in order to make them worthy followers. Within the same unusual frame we can include the several nuns-only one of them was going to graduate.

The motivations for attending the medical school varied from vocation, to searching for a respectable social status or for a profitable job (at the beginning of the '90s being a doctor was still associated with certain advantages, one of the yardsticks for measuring the validity of this assumption being the ferocious competition during the admission exam at the public university), to the continuation of a family tradition or to getting over the frustration one of the parents had for not having been able to do it himself/herself up to getting the title of doctor without the intention of the possessor to ever put in practice what he had learnt or to the mere investment of some time and money into an academic activity.

The fee wasn't very high, as compared to the average wage. The faculty granted only one research scholarship for the highest grade on each semester (if there was more than one person with the same grade, the sum would be shared).

I was pleased, I liked medicine, I had pretty good research conditions, I got used to the mixed student environment, my parents were backing me up so I decided to carry on within the same university.

During the next summer of the first academic year, there were many of my colleagues who went to sit the exam for the public university. Some of them made it, others were accepted for money, but they gave up in order not to lose the year they had already passed.

The next two years passed without any significant event in my life. Some of my colleagues

abandoned the faculty, finding various other orientations, from dentistry to social assistance within the private or the public teaching system. One of my colleagues became an instructor within the Waldorf School. Others didn't manage to get through the ordeal by fire called Pharmacology. Very few went abroad. At the end of this period of time, the ones who were left had to take an exam at the most important pre-clinic subjects. Everybody passed the exam, even if announced as eliminatory, the faculty organizing also a second session of exams. The first ten students took part in an day-school programme, organized by the faculty, together with two hospitals in Bucharest. The students used to work as outer personnel in the surgery and internal medicine sections, benefiting from a scholarship from the faculty. The programme was at a certain moment ceased, after the first probation period, I cannot tell why.

In the fourth year, we started to hear for the first time about the notification for crediting and unfolding of teaching activities. We say that as more than normal. Some of our colleagues had been transferred from other private faculties, including from other cities- a considerable number of students had come from Iași - in search for better teaching conditions. Some also had migrated from our university. To the comparisons between the private and the public system, not always made in favour of the latter, there had been added those between various private faculties. Nobody was yet discussing disestablishing any of the schools. The University, initially, a Ltd. Company had functioned from then on being coordinated by a recently constituted foundation, the Romanian Athenaeum - the accent being deliberately switched from the economic status, which was obviously placing the strongly promoted non-profit condition under question - to the academic status.

The next year, things started to change. C.N.E.A.A (The National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation) was asking the Universities to fulfil a series of conditions in

order to get the accreditation, some of the most important being reduced to having their own teaching staff (but which was obviously going to be appointed by already acknowledged faculties) and their own space. The problem of the clinic spaces had already been very ingeniously and cheaply solved by the rectorship: as the hospitals in Bucharest were a battlefield for the public medical faculty, already with traditional rights and for all the speciality faculties from the private universities in the capital city, they simply moved the centre of interest to Ploiești. The students in the two final years in the Ecologic University in Bucharest had therefore undergone their clinical probation time in hospitals in Ploiești. That was a long period of time when I used to commute almost every day. At a quarter to seven I used to be around Universității Square, next to the Rector's Office. We would get in the buses the faculty had given us and would thus head to Ploiești. The lucky ones would still manage to get an hour of sleep in the car. In what regards the trip, I remember a spring with fields of red lollypops, the long conversations on various themes and certain houses we used to look for every morning. The buses were dropping us off at the key points near the hospitals where we were undertaking the probations, and they were picking us up from the same spots. And we had to be there at the fixed time, or we were going to get back home by train. I have the most diverse memories from this period of time: the filthy sheets from the dermatology clinic, the mornings when we used to start our probation programme a bit late because of a coffee drunk in some tavern, the professionalism of the doctors in the haematology or cardiology departments, the day when we spent about two hours on a lawn around the train station because we had missed the bus. And only one regret: that in almost one year of commuting to Ploiești I didn't go to see the Museum of Watches. When coming back, we usually ate the sandwich we had made at home. Because the day wasn't over. In the afternoon you

had to attend the courses from the residences in Bucharest.

On the score of the news regarding the accreditation of the Vasile Goldiș Medical Faculty in Arad, many of my colleagues had moved there, even if they had to retake a year or two, because the institution, initially a subsidiary of the Ecologic Faculty, had been set up only in 1992. Rumours had it that some persons had managed to transfer even to public faculties.

The academic year 1996-1997 brought with it a more uncertain situation: inspections from the C.N.E.A.A, memoirs, public manifestations, protests organized by the Union of Students from the Carol Davila University, the public medical faculty, transfers from one private faculty to another and back, the failed attempt to create a university fusion. Our medical faculty hadn't been accredited. Everybody was looking for somebody to blame and they used to put the blame on everything: the lack of honesty of the councils, the conspiracy organized by all the other private institutions, the rector's Judaism, the policy of the government. The solution that C.N.E.A.A proposed for the graduates from the non-accredited faculties was that of a national exam consisting of a selection of subjects taught during their university years. Only those passing it would have been granted the right to take part in the graduation examinations. The filter subjects, term which replaced the official one of selection subjects, were more consistent in what concerned the medical school than those for the resident exam. And it additionally comprised the pre-clinic subjects taught in the first half of the faculty.

I didn't attend the first session of that filter exam, organized in Cluj. It was too close to the ending of the academic year. Our rectorship had set an additional test, baptized 'graduation exam', which consisted of an internal medicine test, a surgery test and the last one for which you could choose between paediatrics and gynaecology and back then it used to advise us not to go to Cluj. Those who still wanted to take the selec-

tion exam couldn't get their registration certificate, a compulsory document for the test, without previously having passed the graduation exam. All the more, we were still hoping for the better. Yet, nothing changed. I joined the public protests for a while. Then I made up my mind. The next summer- the initially announced session from February, had been cancelled- I was going to sit the filter exam. I mugged, getting together with a few colleagues and reading not only the treatises in the bibliography, but also a manual of semiology published in Cluj. We had been warned by those who had already sit the exam over the difference between the academic languages in various university centres: Cluj was closer to the German school, while the faculties in the south were especially connected to the French clinic teaching system.

The very matriculation day, a few minutes before, I had found out that the medical school within Titu Maiorescu University had been accredited. Some of my colleagues went home, being sure that they were going to have the possibility to get a transfer there.

The exam was, indubitably, the toughest of my life. A week before and even during the exam, I reread hundreds of pages daily. We had six days of exams: five in a row, consisting of theoretical testing based on the multiple choice test and another day, two or three days after the first five, consisting in the practical exam. The results were given the same evening. The tension was terrible. I had never seen so many people bursting into tears when seeing a grade higher than 5. I could see how, day after day, the doctors watching over us during the exam, finding out that we had passed another test, had a different look in their eyes. For the practical exam we had been one by one taken to the ward, through very well delineated spaces, which allowed no potential crossing with other candidates, in order to take the clinic diagnosis test and then to another two rooms for the interpretation of some tests or of an electrocardiogram and after that of a radiography. Indeed, schools were different. A col-

league of mine who was very appreciated for his clinic sense had failed the practical test for such an incongruity. After having passed the exam I was more convinced than ever that I wasn't able to fail any exam I would have wanted to pass.

The colleagues who either didn't sit the exam or had failed one or more tests, could indeed transfer, after a simple test, to the accredited medical school within Titu Maiorescu University. Yet, even if being ready to take their graduation exam, they had the surprise to be sent back home the same day. They were granted the right to take part in the exam only during the next session. The ones who had moved to Arad had also graduated from the faculty, which had been meanwhile accredited, and could take the gradu-

ation exam. Anyway, those of us who had successfully passed the filter exam came back to Cluj the same autumn of 1998 to sit our graduation exam. During the same period of time or a bit later, I had received an invitation from the Ecological University. It was addressed to all the graduates from the Medical Faculty. I didn't go. I found out from my pals who had attended the meeting that the Rectorship had awarded them a certain 'excellency diploma'. This is how my medical school student years came to an end. In what concerns the apprenticeship years, those of the resident probation, this is another history. For the next decade.

Translated by Raluca Vîjăiac